

Fading Flowers

Call to Worship: Psalm 90

1st Scripture: Genesis 47:1-12

2nd Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-8

Introduction

At my daughter's recent 16th birthday party, I gave a small devotion on the topic of "time" and the brevity of life, taken from Psalm 90 and Genesis 47, which we read for our Call to Worship and first Scripture reading, respectively. For this morning, I want to build on that theme, by considering with you, some of the important thoughts given to us in the text we just read, here at the beginning of Isaiah 40.

To be sure, Isaiah 40 is one of those prophetic texts that contains a double application, first for the Israelites who had been exiled by the Babylonians, and then for those who were called to repentance by John the Baptist, in preparation for the coming Messiah. We will tap into both of these historical contexts, as we seek to draw out critical and relevant applications for us.

I. The Dual Context

Isaiah 40 is a prophecy of comfort, given to a people, who because of their sins, have been delivered over to bondage, having had their city and temple destroyed by their enemies. The Jews, unrelenting in their idolatry, and in their forsaking of the true and living God, were brought under the worst of God's curses, where their Promised Land had spewed them out because of their rebellion. Now in captivity, they were a people who seemed to be without hope. Indeed, they once had the greatest privilege of being God's chosen people, but now, God had cast them out of His presence, and delivered them over to the heathen Babylonians. However, as God had proven Himself gracious countless times before, once again, He was preparing to extend His grace to them. He would yet, restore them and bring them back into the Land. And that is why He begins this prophecy with the words, "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!, says your God."

God is offering His rebellious people grace and hope. Their judgment has been meted out; He had their attention now, and had prepared a remnant of them to be restored to the land.

Notice again, verse 2, “Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.”

And now, God would prepare a way back for the people, through the wilderness, from Babylon to Jerusalem, where they would rebuild their temple, their wall, their lives and their faith. And even as God would lead them through every high and low place in the wilderness, spiritually, He would train their hearts to remain faithful to Him. He would remove all pride (bringing down every mountain), and He would exalt the humble (raising up every valley). And then, the glory of the Lord would be revealed again to His people. They would see, they would rejoice and they would worship. Verses 3-5, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’”

And the primary means that God would use to sanctify, humble, and work in the hearts of the people, preparing them to see the glory of the Lord, was through His Word; through a voice with a divine message; a message that would speak reality into the souls of those who had lost touch with reality, and had gone astray. Verse 6: “The voice said, ‘Cry out!’ And he said, ‘What shall I cry?’” And it is the answer to this question, which provides us with the message, that was to prepare the way for the people, so that, they might behold the glory of the Lord. This was the message that was to be given to a restored Israel, as they prepared to return to the Lord.

Now, before we carefully consider the content of this message, which is our main theme for this morning, let me just quickly sum up the New Covenant application of this text. We know that this has New Covenant relevance because John the Baptist speaks of the “voice of one crying in the wilderness” as a reference to his own ministry. In the context of John’s ministry, who preached a baptism of repentance, he had called the people of his generation, not to return from a Babylonian exile, but rather to repent of their sins, and to return to God in their hearts, which had been exiled and held in bondage by their sins. Through his preaching, calling all to repent, he would bring every mountain down and every valley up, preparing the people to behold the glory of God in the face of the Messiah. He was preparing the people for the Christ, and it

was His glory which the people would behold and lay hold of, if they repented and sought Him in truth. And all flesh would see this glory together, especially as it was revealed in the crucifixion and resurrection of the Christ. But again, what is the preparatory message for both contexts, Old and New Covenant? It is given in verses 6-8, toward which, we will now turn our attention.

II. The Fading/Decaying Beauty of Life

The voice said, “Cry out!” And he said, “What shall I cry?” “All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (vs. 6-8).

As we examine this message, we will consider five main points that can be taken from it:

- 1) The Fading/Decaying Beauty of Life
- 2) The Fragility of Life
- 3) The Brevity of Life
- 4) The Certainty of these Things
- 5) The Enduring Word of God

“All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.” Here, we consider the fading/decaying beauty of life.” It is always a delightful experience to feel the smoothness of fresh, new skin. We often hear the expression, “As smooth as a baby’s skin,” because we know that as we age, our skin tends to get rougher, and eventually wrinkly and old. With the passing of time, comes the passing of beauty.

And when you think back at the famous stars and models of the past; we cringe when we see contemporary pictures of them, because all of the beauty that once mesmerized us, has now faded. We are no longer enamored by their beauty, and we are amazed by how much they have aged and deteriorated. Even costly surgeries are incapable of hiding age, and often times, those who have had repeated surgeries, attempting to look younger, look repulsive and fake, don’t they? You see, all of the make-up products in the world cannot hide what is ultimately

happening to all of us. We are fading. We are decaying. Our bodies are aging and rotting and growing old. This is one of the stark evidences of the fall of mankind. The reality of sin has brought decay and wretchedness to that which was so beautifully designed by the Creator. And this reality is posted everywhere around us, so that, even if we avoid the mirror, nature itself constantly reminds us of the fleeting beauty of mankind. Beautiful flowers and fresh ripe grass, spring up for a short time, and bring a smile of delight to the face, but in only a short time, they all fade and fold and die, just like us. And so, Isaiah is commanded to proclaim this reality to the Israelites who were investing all of their energies into settling down in this life, which had ultimately led them to drift away from the Lord and toward gross idolatry. They had lost sight of the fading beauty of life; they had forgotten that beauty and youth only last for but a day, and then, it all washes away like sidewalk chalk in a rain storm. All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers and the flower fades...”

III. The Fragility of Life

We also see in this picture the fragility of life. When we consider the nature of flowers and grass, as beautiful as they can be when they first spring up, they are yet, very fragile. It doesn't take much to damage them, even before their time. A rose can be stepped on, a daffodil can be pulled apart by a child, a tulip can be eaten away by a worm, fresh grass can be quickly scorched by the sun...etc. Grass and flowers are fragile. But, so is man. Indeed, we are fragile and can break, can we not, brethren? How many people are severely marred, scarred or broken even in their prime, by unsuspecting hardships? A car accident, an unexpected stroke, a hidden cancer, a stray bullet, a slip or a fall, and a host of other possible tragedies can change one's life forever.

I used to work in, and oversee a facility, where we sought to help rehabilitate those who had suffered from some form of Traumatic Brain Injury. People like you and I, living their regular, daily lives, pursuing the American dream, were suddenly struck by some form of unexpected hardship that literally changed their lives forever. Now, for them, they spend their entire lives trying to do the things that we simply take for granted. Daily therapies are given to try to get them to use the bathroom, or to eat, or to read, or to communicate, with as little

assistance as possible. Improvements are very, very slow, and often never unto completion. I remember a young woman who was so talented; she knew a few languages and was very successful. While giving birth to her second child, she had complications, her uterus split open leading to a lack of oxygen getting to her brain. Now, you have to tell her when to go to the bathroom and when to eat lunch. She has the mind of a six year old. She never knew what hit her. One day, she was soaring in success, and the next, she couldn't even spell her own name. Life is fragile. I can spend hours telling you all kinds of stories like hers, but I think you get the point.

The Israelites had begun to live life as if tomorrow would always be a continuation of where today had left off; they presumed upon their Creator, until they were struck by the Babylonians and exiled from their land. And all they could look back on was a devastated piece of real estate, with a leveled temple, destroyed wall, and broken down homes. All that they had; all of the memories of their frivolous, careless living was wiped away in but a moment, and now they understood just how fragile and touchable they truly were. This was a reminder that the prophet was called to convey to them through His Book (even written many years before their destruction had taken place). God was so gracious, that even while He was proclaiming their coming destruction, He was also proclaiming a successive restoration, all before any of these things had actually taken place, so that, they could be certain of their restoration once their devastation was fulfilled (in keeping with the Word of God).

IV. The Brevity of Life

Finally, we find here as well, a critical reminder of the brevity of life. Beauty is fading, life is fragile, and life is short. Perhaps, you might get through life unscathed by those types of intrusions that could compromise your fragile nature, but no one escapes the great equalizer, death. And while death, in and of itself, is unnatural and the most potent evidence of the fall of mankind, the fact that death is a reality that is very near to each of us, time wise, makes the matter more sobering and discouraging. In other words, it's not simply the fact that we will die, it's the fact that we will "very soon" die, which is emphasized here in Isaiah's message.

Indeed, we are like fading flowers, sprung up one day, and passing on the next one. The examples given in our first two Scripture readings should suffice to bring this reality to the forefront of our minds for this morning. It was a one hundred and thirty year old Jacob, who had informed Pharaoh that his years were few and evil, or few and full of many troubles. And Moses, probably well over a hundred, wrote Psalm 90, pleading with God to teach His people to number their days, which were likewise short and full of many sorrows. And if this was the case for these two faithful men of God, in their upper years (which were well beyond the span of the average lifespan in our day), what does that say for us? Children, have you ever met an elderly person who failed to declare that his/her life has seemed so short? The seeming crawl of your younger years, will take off like a freight train before you know it, and you will look back with the rest of us, and say, as we have all said, "Life is but a breath!" It is very short. The Scriptures compare it to a shadow or a vapor. You see, your shadow is reflected on the wall, but in but a short time, it disappears as the sun continues its course toward sunset. And a vapor; the presence of a visible gas, can be seen for but a few short minutes, before it rises up beyond your sight. This is the idea that the Scriptures are seeking to convey to us.

And again, the Israelites lived as if the moments they were passing through in their leisure were everlasting moments, when in reality they were but mere breaths. Their sinful living and neglect of seeking the true and living God, would soon come back to bite them, and bite them it did, leaving an indelible wound. And now, in captivity, they could look back with regret, and see that all of the temporal joys, for which they lived their lives, were gone. They were but fleeting moments grounded in foolish choices they had made, as they sought to live for the moment, with hardly a thought of the bigger picture. The seeds were sown, the fleshly crop was planted, and now they were reaping the rotten fruit of their wicked labors.

And is this not what some of you are doing here, this morning? How many of you are living for today, with very little concern for your coming end? How many of you are sowing a harvest of corruption, from which, you will soon have to eat, at the end of this very brief trek, we call life? See the warning of this universal message, fit for all people, nations, races and times. The person you look at in the mirror every day... is aging. Your beauty will fade. Your life is fragile and prone to being drastically changed in but a moment's time. And you are dying. Your

life is almost over, no matter how old you are, and you will soon have to stand before God to give an account for how you have lived. And you are sowing a harvest of seed by the daily choices that you make. And once the crop comes...which again, is not that far away, you will have to live with the consequences of what you have sown.

How can we be certain that this message is, indeed, true for all of us? Well, we might look at history, and the lives of every single human being who has ever existed before us, and see that the statistics 100% affirm these realities. But, there is another more certain confirmation that we have, which we will now briefly consider.

V. The Certainty of These Things

“All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, *because the breath of the LORD blows upon it*; surely the people are grass” (vs. 6b-7).

Beauty fades, life is fragile and life is brief, because “*the breath of the Lord blows upon it.*” In other words, God has ordained life to unfold in this way, as a consequence of the fall. And isn't it ironic that the same breath which has formed man and has given him the wonderful gift and privilege of existing and enjoying life, is the same breath that corrodes and takes it away? From the beginning, God had promised that on the day that Adam should rebel against God's command, *he would surely die.* And that is exactly what has happened ever since. Like our earthly father, we die. God's curse meets all of mankind in his fallen condition, showing that sin against our holy God always brings about corruption and death. What we are inwardly in our rebellion, is what we become outwardly in our bodies. And so, the guarantee of all that we have gone over, concerning the fading beauty, fragility and brevity of life, is certified not merely by statistics (although they tell the same story), but by the certainty of God's promise to fallen sinners. Israel forgot, or at the very least, neglected to consider this reality. But, in due time, God's curse caught up with them. And the same can be said for us today. In due time, it will catch up with us, perhaps much sooner than we presently realize even.

We did say that this was a message of comfort, didn't we? Where is the comfort in this message then, which the prophet is to proclaim? Well, it is in the last portion of the verse, where

we are given the hope of one thing that never fades or dies, and which transcends all covenants and ages. No, we cannot trust in this life, or in anything that has its root in this world, but we can rest our souls upon something rock solid, which will never, ever fail... the enduring and unfailing Word of God!

VI. The Enduring Word of God

“All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. [Indeed] The grass withers, the flower fades, *but the word of our God stands forever*” (vs. 6-8).

There is one thing that is absolutely certain, trustworthy, reliable, and has stood the test of time. There is one thing that we can rest our souls upon, in the context of a world that is wholly unstable, fragile and inevitably breaking down. And that is the Word of God. God blows upon this sin-cursed world, and man decays and dies like a fading flower. But, the same God has also given a refuge of hope for man; that which contains an eternal guarantee, so that, we can ultimately overcome the effects of sin, conquer death, and live forever in glory with Him. In the midst of so much sorrow and despair, God has stepped in to provide us with a living hope. And to this end, He offers “comfort” to all those who will give heed to His Word, which is especially bound up in the Gospel of His beloved Son!

It is in the Gospel, and the Christ of the Gospel, that we find the glorious and certain hope of redemption; forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and a certain and guaranteed resurrection from the dead, and that, unto eternal life! Friends, will you continue to place your hope in a fading, dying, temporal, short-lived world, where you don’t know what a day will bring to your fragile body? Your beauty is fading. Your life is but a vapor in length, and you will soon have to stand before God to give an account for how you have lived it. Why will you invest your life in a no-win situation, for a few fleeting moments of sinful joy and pleasure, when your eternity is in the balance? [The Gospel!!!]

Brethren, in light of what we know about the fading reality of this world, how much ought we to invest our lives into it? How much ought we to invest our lives into the work of the Kingdom of God? You only live here once. Make it count! Benediction: Jude 1:24-2